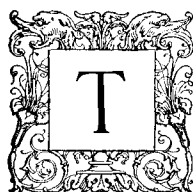


The Obsequies of Peter Schwarz

BY CORNELIA A. P. COMER



HE strange idea came to him just as he was driving his family home from Jacob Reinig's funeral.

The September day was mellow, radiant. Across the flat, juicy acres of good Ohio land the afternoon sun lay warm and benignant. The countryside was at rest in the peace that follows effort. The fields had earned their right to smile back idly at the pleasant sun, for their yield had been heavy. Peter Schwarz was conscious, as always, that this material world is near and warm and good, but with that consciousness mingled other, more unwonted reflections.

For some inexplicable reason death and our pitiful, belated tenderness toward those who have gone had never so impressed Peter Schwarz as to-day, elder though he was, and thinker though he believed himself to be. Jacob Reinig, from whose funeral he came, had been a poor man; he farmed but seventy acres; his barns were small, his cattle few. Yet he had lived in decency and died with the respect of men. On this day when his neighbors met for the last civilities, the preacher had called upon a few of them, as was the custom in this community, to tell what they knew of him who was gone. Awkwardly, slowly, sincerely, one after another proffered his testimony: Jacob Reinig was a brave man; he met loss with a cheerful face and disaster with firm lips. Jacob Reinig was a good man; he kept the Commandments of his God, he lent a helping hand to his neighbor. Jacob Reinig was a generous man; he gave what he could not afford, he let others reap where he had sown. Jacob Reinig was even, last excellence of all, a meek man; he forgave one who had spitefully used him. "Which I've never done, myself," said the neighbor who told of this, "and probably never shall. I'm not sure I wish

for such virtue. But Jacob Reinig, he had it."

It was a simple, homely service, but what it all meant was that the passing of this man through the world had left no scars and gashes. No crushed, embittered soul exulted in his going. He stood between no man and the sun.

Peter Schwarz pondered these matters as he drove homeward. Kind things had been said, and they rang true. Now if Jacob Reinig, weazened, work-worn, struggling little man that he was, could have heard them with his living ears, how he would have exulted in the music of such commendation! As incense and all sweet spices to his nostrils, as spike-nard and Gilead's balm to his worn body, would such words have been to his spirit, doubtless bruised by life's long struggle—for who escapes unscathed from the mill of God? Not Jacob Reinig, and certainly not Peter Schwarz.

Why, then, could there not be some such service of approval held while a man yet lived? Our neighbors, the witnesses of our lives, know as well what they think of us the year before our death as the day after. What is to hinder them from sharing that knowledge with us? Nothing but custom closes their lips while we live, to open them when we die. Is it not a custom that would be best honored in the breach?

In the deliberate, somewhat reluctant brain of Peter Schwarz there struggled toward expression the notion of some such service offered as a stirrup-cup to souls about to ride forth into the dark. As men grow old it is not their bodies only that become stiff and enfeebled, needing stimulus and cheer. Their spirits, too, demand some generous, sparkling liquid to fortify them against that creeping, deadly cold. And the very wine of life is love and praise.

Clear sounded the hoofs of the well-matched span on the hard graveled road. The family surrey rolled comfortably

along. On the back seat his wife and Millie talked with such subdued cheerfulness as became the occasion. Beside him, hands in pockets, lolled his only living son. Peter held the reins, as he had always done. Not while he lived would others drive his horses.

Eight children had been born to Peter and Katrina Schwarz. Of the four who lived, two were married and gone. The son and daughter remaining, children of their middle years, gave zest to their old age.

Amelia, her father's favorite, leaned forward and touched him on the shoulder.

"What makes you so quiet, pap?" she demanded, abruptly.

The dark color rose slowly to the man's face, for the girl had startled him. He was not ready yet to share his slowly crystallizing thoughts, and he was glad that they came just then to the wide sweep of road at the entrance to his barnyard. The bustle of catching the cord of the patent gate-opener, of driving in through the lifted gate and getting the family unpacked from the carriage made any answer superfluous.

When supper was over and the work at the barns was done, Peter Schwarz took his place upon the wide steps of the recessed porch, lit his seldom-used pipe, and again set himself to thinking. He was one of those men to whom ideas came powerfully, if seldom. Once an intellectual conception penetrated his brain, it became almost an obsession.

He had a rounded, benignant forehead, and his head was high above the ears, but his upper lip was long and flat, and his semicircular mouth shut like a trap in a hard, inflexible line that emphasized his heavy chin. His sharp gray eyes could be very cold, though they were sometimes gentle. He wore a short fringe of white beard from ear to ear, and his domed head was only partly covered with iron-gray hair. Square and powerful of build and now grown somewhat portly, he appeared a strong man and not altogether an unkindly one. As he sat there, frowning slightly in his absorption, so near the ground upon which his well-built brick farm-house stood with an air of assurance and possession, he looked very closely akin to the solid

earth, the solid house, and the brown fields which he dominated.

The girl Millie made a sudden rush from the house, as a playful kitten does, and curled herself beside her father on the steps with something of a kitten's flippant confidence. Her mother came out more slowly, knitting in hand, and took the rocking-chair behind them.

Katrina Schwarz was an ample, large-framed, motherly woman, deep-bosomed and broad-shouldered. Her mild brown eyes regarded the world with the high dignity of an unselfish soul. She had to an unusual degree that air of great good sense and reasonableness characterizing so many elderly women of German blood. Yet in spite of all this she looked down a little wistfully at her husband and her child. A woman is always a woman, no matter what her years or her reasonableness. But Peter Schwarz had long ago forgotten that his wife was other than a cosmic blessing, like pure air or spring sunshine or autumn rain. Her merits were even more a matter of course than the sprouting of seeds or the ripening of grain. He sometimes remembered to thank Heaven for these mercies, but he was wholly unaware that Katrina also might be classified as a mercy.

Millie rubbed her cheek tentatively against her father's coat-sleeve.

"Well, pap, what are you thinking about now?"

He returned the caress with clumsy playfulness. Millie was the one human creature who could cajole him into such behavior. Katrina, watching, sighed vaguely, then smiled—for, after all, it was a definite good that Peter could still love and still caress.

"You may tell me first what's whirling around in that silly little head of yours, Clara Amelia Schwarz."

Millie straightened up, hands clasped about her knees, looking off with an expression of sudden rapture.

"A hat, pap! Such a hat I seen yesterday when me and mother drove to town with the butter and eggs. It's at that new milliner's across the square from the grocery. I heard she's got a trimmer from Chicago yet! Would you believe it? The hat was a black crown and a white rim with just a black line

on the edge and one great big, *big* red rose right here"—she gestured rapidly—"and the green leaves go *this* way and *that* way, like they was reaching out to clasp around your head!"

"And what has Amelia Schwarz to do with such a hat? Tell me that!" her father demanded, half frowning.

Millie's gray eyes grew shrewder and more intent. It suddenly became apparent that, though her figure was girlishly slender and her hair fluffed about her face, she had her father's nose and mouth, with some of the traits they implied.

"Thomas's grocery has fifteen customers a week for our two-pound pats of butter—folks who won't take any other if they can help it. You say it takes too long for mother and me to drive around and deliver it when you are needing the horses, but Luella Spelzer says I may leave it at her house and let the people come there for it. They will take the extra trouble because the butter is always hard and sweet and yellow, and they will pay me what they pay the grocery. That is from sixty to ninety cents a week to add to my share of the butter money. It won't take me long to get that hat!"

Peter Schwarz thrust his lower lip out thoughtfully, deeply gratified by her shrewdness.

"Not bad for a silly head," was his verdict. "Maybe you'll learn your way about this world yet."

Millie shot a quick, sideways look at him and judged the moment propitious to say, "Mother needs a new bonnet, too."

The atmosphere changed suddenly. There was no mistaking the black frown upon the man's face.

"But it was only last winter that your mother had a bonnet! Not another so soon! Heavens and earth! Is there no end to the money these women would spend? You will bring me to the county-house yet, if you have your heads! I say, no new bonnet!" He brought his hand heavily down upon his knee.

Millie drew a quick breath. She might coquet with her father, but she loved her mother as well as she knew how to love. The woman in the back-

ground, who had dropped her knitting to hear the girl plead her cause, picked it up again placidly. These eruptions were too familiar to be disconcerting. Katrina Schwarz was no weakling. What she judged needful for a decent appearance she would buy when the time was ripe. Meantime she kept her own counsel. Still—how pleasant if Peter might just for once faintly guess the meaning of the word indulgent!

"So that is what I was thinking about," said Millie, adroitly; "how to make ninety cents a week more on the butter. Now you tell me what you were thinking over, pap."

Peter Schwarz relaxed his frown and consented to forget his wife's prospective extravagance, for he was ready now to share his thought with them.

"While you were thinking vanities and spending," he declared, "I was looking forward to the day of my death. It came to me this afternoon at Jacob Reinig's that it is good to be dead."

Millie shivered.

"Oh, pap, it's horrible!"

"But, no," said Peter Schwarz, heavily. "It is not so I see the thing. Be quiet and I will tell you. It is good to be dead—yes. Never did it come to me so clear as to-day. Peter Reinig's fields are harvested, his summer work is done. Red are the leaves on his maples and the quail run in his stubble. . . . Outside was a quietness, a peace. The house, too, was in order, swept and garnished—is it not so? To lie there with folded hands and flowers on one's breast and the glare of the sun shut out. The plowing, the sowing, the reaping—all over. No more thoughts of cost and payment, of earning, of spending, of saving. Can you not see how that would be peace?"

Millie shook her head dubiously. Katrina said nothing.

"It lacks but one thing to make it very good," continued the man. "I had this thought: it would be better still if, before a man lays down his work, he might hear with his living ears such things as his neighbors say of him in their hearts. There are two judgments, and the judgment of men comes before that of Heaven. Sometimes—who knows?—it may be the kinder. Wouldn't Peter Reinig have gone to meet his God more

cheerfully if he had first known the things men said of him this day?—I tell you, yes! As for me, Peter Schwarz, I would like it well to know men's speech of me when I lie in my coffin with quiet hands—and I mean to know! This is what I have decided, and I tell you, Katrina, and you, Amelia, that you may be prepared. When the time comes that I grow feeble and can no more come in and go out as I will, then will I make a feast and bid my neighbors. And I will choose a minister and he shall preach such a sermon as he would preach if I had gone away to return no more. And he shall ask testimony of my neighbors, and they shall give it as though I were among them dead, not living. And I shall hear for myself what they think of my up-risings and my down-sittings amongst them through these years. I will set my life on trial before them and let them give verdict. It will be well for me to know if what I have done meets with their sense of what a man should do, and I shall go to my own place in greater peace."

Peter Schwarz had risen in his excitement and resolve and stood facing them, giving forth his decree with upraised hand. His daughter's small eyes grew wide with consternation and her face puckered pitifully.

"Oh, pap, *don't!*" she wailed, driven to entire frankness by what seemed to her the appalling prospect. "Oh, don't, don't do that! Everybody will make fun of us for miles around—and everybody will say, '*It's so Dutch!*'"

Katrina Schwarz, who had not ceased to rock and knit as she listened, put down her work for an instant and leaned forward to face her husband sympathetically. She understood his unrest and his craving, but she did not approve.

"Better not, Peter," she said, mildly but clearly. "I tell you—*better not!*"

To oppose Peter Schwarz was to set his will the more firmly upon the undesirable thing. Millie and her mother, having learned this lesson thoroughly, did not allude to the matter of Peter's pre-funeral services. And Peter himself said nothing more. He was still a sound and healthy man, with no justification, as yet, for the ceremony he had planned.

But he thought of it often, and, more and more, the event took shape in his mind as the crowning festival of a life's effort.

Five years went by. Peter's seventieth birthday came and went; it found and left him hale, but at seventy-two came the first break. Over-work in the harvest-field brought on heat prostration, and this was followed by a slight "stroke." He improved rapidly, and the doctor prophesied entire recovery, but Peter shook his head. Unused to any illness, he seemed to himself in worse case than he was. He proceeded to set his affairs in order, and, when this was done, one afternoon Luther drove him away on some unexplained errand. He came back looking agitated, half-ashamed, but resolved.

"The twenty-third of September is my seventy-third birthday, Katrina. It is time for me to do the thing I have planned these five years. I have seen William Dick, the young minister in town. He will preach for me a funeral sermon. It is all arranged. Have what help you need and get ready a meal for a hundred people. I will send out word through the neighborhood at once and ask all to come."

The manner of this announcement left little room for effective protest. Katrina shook her head slowly.

"You are foolish, Peter, but I will do as you say," she observed, calmly. "I suppose we can get the folding-chairs from the church, and Martha Ricker and Elsa will help me through. But the doctor says you must not be made tired or worked upon by anything. If you think this is minding him—"

"What is to be, will be," said Peter Schwarz. "Though it kill me I will do this thing."

There was nothing further to say. Katrina was not a woman to waste words. She accepted the inevitable, and her preparations went bravely forward. Millie, now a competent young person of twenty-two, scolded and fretted to herself and to her mother.

"What use?" said Katrina, wearily. "What use, child? Be quiet and save your strength for your work. When the man of the house says 'Do this,' it must be done. Pray that your father takes no harm from it, as I am doing,

and get on with your cleaning and pickling. The front-room curtains must be washed to-day, the green-tomato pickle must be made to-morrow, and when we go to town on Saturday see that I remember to get fresh calico to cover the settee. It shall not be said that my house was disordered."

"The township will buzz with it. Everybody will laugh. It will be in the county papers. How comes pap to think of such things? I wish I could go away and never come back!"

"Two hams," said Katrina, steadily, "seven beef tongues, and forty frying-chickens. Will that be enough?"

"Oh, mother! mother! don't you care?"

Katrina looked pityingly at her child across the illuminating years between them.

"What people say will not hurt you—any more than it will help your father. So long as you care, you are weak. Listen only to what your own heart says. So will you have strength for life and death. Now get on with your curtain-washing!"

When the day arrived Katrina's preparations were complete. The plates and napkins, the forks and spoons, were piled ready for passing; long tables were crowded with the food: platters of tender ham, pale rose and white; platters of melting tongue, fawn-color and red; platters of fried chicken in delicious shades of brown and tan; platters of Katrina's marvelous liver sausage, an exquisite gray; dishes of "sour potatoes," as the salad was called. In the kitchen Martha Ricker and her daughter Elsa were making dozens of flaky biscuit and getting ready the great boiler of coffee. Of "bread spreads" to go with the biscuit there were eight—apple butter, peach butter, pear butter, grape jelly, crab-apple jelly, currant jelly, strawberry preserves, and peppermint honey from Peter Schwarz's own hives. There were baked custards and "floating island" and lemon apple-sauce. There was pound cake and fruit cake and a wonderful "sunshine cake," as well as rich little cakes whose composition was Katrina's secret. Of things spiced and pickled there were so many that the beholder ceased to count.

"Of this, at least, I am not ashamed," said Katrina Schwarz as she gave her last instructions in the kitchen and her last glance at the tables before she went into the best room to take her seat beside her husband.

The front room opened by an arch into the family sitting-room, and both were of generous proportions. The little table for the minister, with its bouquet of zinnias and its glass of water, stood in this archway. Peter and Katrina were to sit opposite him between the western windows, in full view from both rooms. Millie and Luther were beside them, and the married daughter, Anna, with her four children, across the room. The folding-chairs from the church were in double and triple rows about the rooms, and they were already nearly filled as Katrina moved to her seat.

She noted that Peter was breathing rather heavily. The excitement of this great day was already telling upon him. He sat very erect, with his head high, not meeting the gaze of the assembly. There were reddish gleams in his gray eyes and a flush on his broad cheek. It came to Katrina, as she glanced at him, that this was no longer the strong, shrewd, sometimes harsh man whom she had lived beside for nearly fifty years. She was seeing at last the face of that hidden, uncertain Peter who had only revealed himself to her by brief glimpses. This was Peter the curious Bible-student, Peter the debater, the Peter who cast suspicious eyes over his own past deeds, pulling a little here and pushing a little there, to straighten the wavering line of them. And this Peter now reached out uneasily for the approval of his peers, as if his self-assurance failed. Katrina faced her guests more steadily, more masterfully, as she realized, by one of those deep intuitions which come to married folk, that the hour of his greatest weakness was upon Peter Schwarz.

The minister was young and somewhat shallow, and he did not know Peter, but he did his best. He read the twenty-sixth Psalm; a quartet about the melodeon in the living-room sang, "Only remembered by what he has done."

"For it is required of stewards," recited the minister, impressively, "that a man

be found faithful." He made a little discourse on this text; he spoke of the responsibility of living; of the great responsibility of character which we take with us from this world, and even of property which we leave behind; of the satisfaction it is to a man to look back on a life spent according to his conscience, knowing that he has done the utmost with his gifts, his money, and himself. Such a man, he did not doubt, was Peter Schwarz, prominent in his own community, with a name known outside its borders. Even a stranger like himself could not meet Mr. Schwarz without feeling his force, his power. How much better, then, must all his good qualities and his good deeds be known to the men whom he had lived among since he came to this community fifty years ago, when it was still a raw, new land. He would ask some of Mr. Schwarz's old friends and neighbors to complete the picture, which he had not the ability or the experience to make perfect, of this man's long, useful life in this spot.

There was an understanding between Peter and Elias Barrick that the latter should be the first to speak, but Elias Barrick was stiff-jointed and rheumatic, and before he could rise his own son Herman was on his feet and speaking. There was a sound of approval and an exchange of glances among the younger men.

Herman Barrick was a narrow-chested young man, with sunburned cheeks and a bulbous nose. He had a dogged jaw, however, and although he was embarrassed, he spoke out as he intended.

"I mean no disrespect to the minister, and I'm not saying Peter Schwarz don't live according to his lights, but I'd like to know just what them lights are. Why'd he foreclose the mortgage on Martha Ricker's eighty next to his south forty, when he knew that if he gave her till after harvest she might ketch up on the int'rest, and that if she was wise to business she could easy 'a' borrowed the money somewheres else? He don't foreclose his mortgages on the farms of men who know you can git all the money you want for six per cent. an' good security. This is all I've got to say."

Very red, but steadfast, Herman Barrick dropped into his chair. Like a flash

Luke Kalbfleisch, across the room, was on his feet.

"I mean no disrespect to the minister, and I ain't saying Peter Schwarz don't live according to his lights, but when I bought my wood of him two years ago he showed me fine hard wood, cut and piled and dried in his wood-lot. When I got it, a good fourth of it was dozy old fence-rails mixed with the better stuff. I can burn fence-rails—but not at the price of good wood. That's all I have to say."

One or two of the older men hissed ineffectually. The minister, who had recovered his self-possession, pounded on the little table with his knuckles.

"Stop! Stop!" he cried. "This is indecent. It is an insult to me and to Mr. Schwarz. I beg of you—"

This time it was young Dave Lindsay from the Scotch settlement in the next township who was on his feet. David Lindsay, his father, sprang up and clutched him by the sleeve, but with an adroit twist young Dave was out of his coat and across the room. He lifted a high, taunting voice.

"I mean no disrespect to the minister, and I know *he* lives according to his lights; for when Lizzie Dickerman, his own niece that he'd been guardeen to, come to him to buy her thousand-dollar mortgage just before she got married—she wanted to sell it so's to pay the money on a piece of land—he give her the thousand dollars and said nothing about the accrued interest. It was eight per cent. money, an' the eighty dollars come in in just four days. Nice way to treat an orphan that was his own kin! She didn't know nothin' about accrued int'rest. Father, I'll take that coat."

"I mean no disrespect to the minister," piped under-sized Philip Hinkel, standing on his chair to make himself heard in the increasing tumult, "but one day I was at the hardware store in town and the clerk says to me: 'Say, do you want to see the meanest man in this county? That's him luggin' an iron wash-boiler out of his wagon. He come in here rippin' mad, an' he says: 'If I get a tin boiler with a copper bottom, my wife she wears one out every five years. I ain't goin' to stand for it,' says he. 'Gimme an iron boiler.' 'Do you know they're cruel heavy for a woman?'"

says I. "They ain't really fit to handle 'em." "Gimme an iron boiler," says he. "If it's heavy, it will last the longer. I'll teach 'em to wear their wash-boilers out!" and with that he lugged it off, though he could hardly stagger under it. Now wouldn't that jar you?" says the clerk. I gave a look an' I said: 'Why, that's Peter Schwarz. That's the leadin' citizen out our way.' 'Holy smoke!' says the clerk, 'your leadin' citizens must be headed backward and streakin' it for the Dark Ages!' That's just what he said. But I ain't got anything personally against Mr. Schwarz."

With the first words of Herman Barrick, fear clutched the heart of Peter Schwarz. Before he knew what had befallen him, he shrank in a blind terror. As Herman's words pierced to his brain and burned themselves in, he tried to find his voice, to rise, to face down this accusation, but his muscles refused to lift him; he sat shaking in his chair. As speech swiftly followed speech, he realized that the young men had plotted cleverly to humiliate him on this day that was to have crowned his strenuous years. But why had he no defenders? Where were his friends? Was this thing to be allowed? Would no man stop it? Out of his agony he heard Elias Barrick feebly hiss his son; he saw David Lindsay's ineffectual clutch as one sees a night landscape by a flash of lightning. Dear God, were old men all so weak and young men all so hard! Was there no help anywhere, no comfort, no defense?

He met Millie's eyes across the room—his latest-born, his darling. She was young, but surely she could understand. His anguished gaze held hers, demanding love and succor. Millie could not endure the look. Her lids fell and she turned her head away almost pettishly. Pap had brought this ridicule, this open disgrace, upon them.

To Peter Schwarz it was almost as though a knife had gone to his heart or a bullet to his brain. Silently, but definitely, his child had repudiated him.

Confusion fell upon him. He seemed to see but dimly through a mist that flashed red, grew quickly black, and then very slowly retreated.

As this mist cleared he became aware that his wife had risen in her place beside

him and was speaking. The familiar sound of her voice was driving that horror of darkness back. His uncertain fingers crept out till they caught a fold of her dress and clutched at it. Katrina felt the tug, and moved imperceptibly closer to his side.

The confusion subsided as she rose. Already the young men looked shame-faced and their elders stern. There would be payment before long for their interruption!

Katrina faced them all, steadily, but not in anger. For the moment there was something majestic in her motherly presence. They were conscious of a dignity that came from afar and was not as any assurance that they knew.

"It is not fitting that my husband or the minister should answer these speeches," said Katrina. "I take it upon myself. And what I have to say is this: Neighbors, you were asked here to give such judgment as the living give upon the dead. I told my man it could not be—and these young men have proved it—for in the face of death even young men lose their insolence.

"I told him, too, that it was a weakness to desire this service, for it is when we fear condemnation that we ask for praise. But he would not heed me, and so this thing has happened.

"I do not deny the things you have said. My man has made mistakes. So will you make them, Herman Barrick, and you, Luke Kalbfleisch, and you, Dave Lindsay. Perhaps even little Philip Hinkel may be enough of a man to do wrong. For a man sins through his strength.

"You have shown that Peter Schwarz has been mean and grasping and hard. But what do you know of the ways by which these things came upon him? When a man is single, he is independent and strong. Perhaps his father's purse and his father's arm are behind him. Anyhow, bread comes easy and he has little care. But suppose there are two mouths to fill—then four, then eight. Then comes the Fear! He has but two arms against the world—and so many mouths to feed three times a day. You young men—what do you know of that Fear? I am not saying that some men are not mean from their cradles, but I

know that more grow grasping through fear. Yes, it is all wrong, but it is hard to be generous with the babies' bread, and greed, once learned, is hard to forget. That is the way it came on Peter Schwarz.

"Now this is what I wish you to understand. A man will let himself become hard in his own person, as a bear will use his claws, but the inner heart of him may still be tender. When a man and his wife are one, as Peter Schwarz and I have been one these forty-seven years, in time the woman becomes—how shall I say it? She is the mildness of that man, his justice and his service. To her he leaves it to mend his mistakes. He knows she does those things that for his infirmity of spirit are hard for him, and, though he says nothing, he is glad. I do not say this is a good way or a bad way. I say it is the way of many men, and Peter Schwarz is one.

"You, Luke Kalbfleisch, don't you know when our barn was re-roofed I sent your wife four great loads of dry shingles, kindling for two whole years? That ought to even us for the dozy fence-rails.

"As for Lizzie Dickerman, when she married I gave her a half-dozen of the heavy linen sheets that my grandmother spun and wove and a dozen of the best towels that have come down to me. I gave her, too, a pair of beautiful new blankets and a pair of solid silver forks. Maybe more is due her, but I keep these accounts and settle them. In time all is made straight.

"My husband did covet Martha Ricker's eighty that was next our south forty, as Ahab coveted the vineyard of Naboth. But her equity in it was less than half its value. The foreclosure was begun but not put through. For her equity he gave her forty acres of even better land across the road. Is that the deed of a hard man? Ask Martha Ricker, now at work in this house, if she thinks so! And the wash-boiler, Philip Hinkel—yes, it was a meanness. But do you think I did not know whence that meanness sprang and where it tended? And do you think I did not get my copper-bottomed boiler when next I went to town?—though I kept the iron one to shame him with when I thought best.

"So now I have told you how these things are, and there are many like them.

But so far as I know, Peter Schwarz has done no wrong that has not been set right. Of his own will he let me be his conscience and his heart, and before God will I answer for him. For the man may be the head of the woman, but the woman is the keeper of the man."

So saying, Katrina took her seat. And there fell on her audience the silence that is more than applause.

While his wife was speaking, Peter Schwarz came slowly back to himself. The ringing in his head died down. The darkness before his eyes retreated. His first conscious sensation was one of passionate thankfulness. He had felt himself swinging over a frightful precipice, and Katrina was somehow putting the firm ground under his feet.

He began to apprehend her exposition and her argument. From point to point she went, explaining, justifying, making all things clear. He had been ashamed, often and often, of giving in when she urged some gentle act upon him, especially, perhaps, in that matter of Martha Ricker's land. She had fought him fiercely over that; he told her she knew no business, she must keep her fingers out of his affairs. Yet, truly, he had yielded in the end, as he always yielded. And she claimed the core of him was sound and generous? It was so! Yes, it was so! He was not the hard, base, greedy thing he had so often feared he was. Unbelievable—but she had proved it. . . . Why, the woman knew him as God knew him, as he did not even know himself!

He looked from her cramped, shriveled fingers to her lined cheeks with a sudden ecstasy like that of youth. There was a strange glory round about her fine old head, and his heart was at her feet. For she was the woman God had given, and she brought him salvation from himself.

In the silence after Katrina had finished, Peter Schwarz rose to his feet. His broad face seemed untroubled, his voice was deep and full. There was a freedom and a graciousness in his whole bearing it had never had before.

"Neighbors, my wife has spoken, and my wife and I are one. The meal is ready and I ask you all to eat with us in friendliness. There is no more to say."

